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STANFORD UNIVERSITY

MEDICAL CENTER
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

DEPARTMENT OF GENETICS

Professor J. Lederberg, Executive

EDITOR

New York Times
New York, N.Y.

Sir:

The Times for February 13 quoted an editorial that appeared in SCIENCE magazine commenting on the validity of plans for Mars exploration. The editorial was written by Dr. Philip H. Abelson, who is correctly identified as the editor of the magazine.

Dr. Abelson is, of course, entitled to the expression of his views on this and other controversial issues. Nor has there been any misrepresentation on his part, or in articles in the Times that have quoted him, with respect to the relationship between his views and those of the 90,000 scientist members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which sponsors the magazine. However, references to the Association may lead to some impression that some collective opinion of the membership is reflected in Dr. Abelson's editorials. In the absence of any reliable mechanism for an objective poll of this opinion, I can see no way of knowing whether this is the case or not.

Unlike Dr. Abelson, I do not profess to know whether life does or does not exist on Mars, and I would encourage the exploration of the planet as the only means of answering a question whose interest and importance have not been doubted. Implicit in this approach is the need for temperate caution against carrying terrestrial microbes to that planet; I would certainly support an emphasis on reconnaissance from flyby and orbiter missions before ultimate decisions are made on the detailed characteristics of exploratory landings.

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N.B. -----NOT FOR PUBLICATION-----

~~xxx~~ In judging whether to accept this letter for publication you may wish to know

1) Dr. Abelson is doubtless referring to my recommendations ~~xxxx~~ a) advocating a search for extraterrestrial life, but b) with stringent precautions against contamination. See e.g., Science, 132:393 (1960).

2) I would of course prefer to answer him in SCIENCE, but he has just refused to accept an article from me to this effect after a two months' delay

3) the scientific and technical aspects of the controversy certainly deserve to be aired, and I am sure will be. However, I merely wish to put my views on public record, not become involved in any lengthy polemics, nor any more extensive public comment

4) from my own observations, the relationships between Dr. Abelson's views and those of the AAAS membership have not been clarified (though I note no factual errors) in the newspaper accounts.

5) I am not a member of the AAAS, but only because my wife already is. She tells me she has never been consulted for her opinion on any subject on which Dr. Abelson has written.

6) if you require any information on my credentials, please consult American Men of Science.
